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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: MILITARY MOVES FROM ABKHAZIA ON THE HORIZON?

REF: A. TBILISI 2271

[B.](#) [HTTP://WWW.ABKHAZIAGOV.ORG/RU/PRESIDENT/PRESS /NEW-S/DETAIL.PHP?ID=14295](http://WWW.ABKHAZIAGOV.ORG/RU/PRESIDENT/PRESS /NEW-S/DETAIL.PHP?ID=14295)

[C.](#) TBILISI 2053

[D.](#) TBILISI 2413

[E.](#) [HTTP://CONSILIUM.EUROPA.EU/UEDOCS/CMSUPLOAD/1_6110-8%20RUSSIANS%20RETURN%20TO%20PEREVI.PDF](http://CONSILIUM.EUROPA.EU/UEDOCS/CMSUPLOAD/1_6110-8%20RUSSIANS%20RETURN%20TO%20PEREVI.PDF)

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1.](#) (C) Summary and comment. The chilly winter air in Georgia is rife with rumors that the Abkhaz and Russians are planning military action in the near future, possibly to annex undisputed Georgian territory north of the Enguri River and establish the river as the "border." Facts on the ground seem to lend these rumors credibility: de facto Abkhaz authorities have passed a law unilaterally redrawing the line along the river; UNOMIG and others have observed a substantial military buildup along the administrative boundary; and anecdotal evidence suggests something is afoot.

Post assesses that, if a decision were made by the Abkhaz and Russians to move on the areas around Ganmukhuri and Khurcha, they could establish control within about an hour, with the Georgians able to offer little resistance. It would take only slightly longer to grab the triangle of land west of the Enguri Dam. Although seizing the strategically important triangle is diplomatically riskier and therefore possibly less likely than a move on Ganmukhuri and Khurcha, the seizure of any territory would represent a real test for the U.S. and the international community. Now is the time, before anything happens, to consider not only how we might react in the event, but also what we should do now to raise the cost to Abkhazia and Russia and reduce the likelihood of any moves. End summary and comment.

Preparations are underway

[2.](#) (C) Georgian officials have been warning that the Abkhaz and Russians have their eyes on the pieces of undisputed Georgian territory north of the Enguri (ref A). A quick look at the map shows the attraction. Making the river the line of demarcation would offer clear strategic advantages in terms of maintaining control of the boundary. Controlling the area west of the dam would furthermore give the Abkhaz and Russians the ability to control the dam, and therefore both elements of the Enguri hydroelectric production system. In recent weeks, the chatter in the press and elsewhere about such an intention on the part of the Abkhaz and Russians has increased, especially with regard to Ganmukhuri and Khurcha.

[3.](#) (C) Changing facts on the ground indicate such chatter is not unfounded. On October 26 the Abkhaz "Parliament" announced it had adopted a measure to define the southern "border" of Abkhazia as the Enguri River itself, beginning as

far east as the Nenskra River (ref B). This would include the areas around Ganmukhuri, Khurcha, and the triangle west of the Enguri Dam. This legislative act seems to lay the groundwork for a more forceful assertion of that boundary at some point in the future.

14. (C) Steps to prepare for such a move seem to be proceeding apace. Along with an ongoing expansion of Abkhaz and Russian fortifications along the existing boundary (ref C), there has been a significant uptick in the movement of military hardware in recent weeks. The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) has heard from locals there are now 100 Abkhaz or Russian tanks in the Gali region, and has itself seen evidence of tanks in the Gali region, and has itself seen evidence of tanks across the boundary. The Georgian press reported 55 tanks moving into Gali District on December 11 and a military unit in Gagida, just north of Ganmukhuri. Russian units have reportedly been deployed in Pichori (north of Ganmukhuri), Sida (north of Khurcha), and Chuburkhinji (just east of Sida) -- all villages close to the boundary. The press also reported that Russian forces have been deployed in the heights of Gali District that allow observation and potentially shelling into Zugdidi District.

15. (C) Over the last month or so, UNOMIG has seen its freedom of movement greatly limited. It can now count on access only to a narrow corridor along the M-27; any movements beyond that corridor depend on the mood of local Abkhaz forces. UNOMIG can rarely gain access to the area close to the boundary. On December 12, for example, locals told UNOMIG that 12-14 tanks had moved toward Nabakevi (inside Abkhazia, just across the administrative boundary from Khurcha), and that the road they took was then closed for civilian use. A

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patrol tried to verify the information by approaching the location from another direction, but was prevented from proceeding by a Russian road block. Despite these limitations on its patrols, UNOMIG has been able to confirm significant military movements and equipment in recent weeks.

On December 11, for example, a patrol directly observed a convoy on the M-27 heading south, consisting of 10 T-72 tanks equipped with reactive armor, 6 self-propelled howitzers, 2 armored personnel carriers with turret and machine guns mounted, and other vehicles; the convoy was eventually observed turning off the highway toward Salkhino village (inside Abkhazia between Gali and Zugdidi). UNOMIG also confirmed the presence of unidentified vessels off the coast of Ganmukhuri on December 7 and 20, one of which seemed to resemble a Grisha-class frigate.

What would Georgia do?

16. (C) Based on the apparent strength and location of Abkhaz and Russian forces in the area, post assesses that, once a decision is made to take the areas around Ganmukhuri and Khurcha, the Abkhaz and Russians could do so in about an hour. The triangle of land west of the Enguri Dam would not take much longer to seize. The Georgian Interior Ministry has reinforced its positions along the boundary; UNOMIG reported on December 18, for example, an increase in the number and staffing of Georgian posts in the Ganmukhuri area.

The EUMM reported December 22 that the Georgian 24th tank battalion, consisting of 26 T-72s, recently moved to Senaki Base; the EUMM speculated that this move was in response to recent moves in Abkhazia. Nevertheless, considering the tactical difficulty of defending territory on the far side of the river and the larger military risks of renewing engagement with the Abkhaz and Russians, it is unlikely that the Georgians would be able to put up much resistance to a determined movement to take the areas near Ganmukhuri, Khurcha, and the triangle west of the dam.

What will the Abkhaz and Russians do?

17. (C) Post has heard many predictions that the Abkhaz and

Russians will move at some point. A half-Abkhaz, half-Georgian employee of a western NGO based in Gali, for example, recently told EmbOff that a Russian military commander told her additional military action was coming this spring. Some observers expect action against Ganmukhuri and Khurcha within three months. Although the value of these predictions vary, it is possible to consider issues the Abkhaz and Russians will analyze when making their decision. The strategic interest for the Abkhaz and Russians in both occupying additional territory and establishing a more naturally defensible "border" is clear. The military risk also seems to be fairly low.

¶8. (C) The primary question for them is therefore whether the benefits are worth the potential diplomatic costs. In making this determination, the Abkhaz and Russians will no doubt look to the example of Perevi (ref D). In this case, Russian forces established control over a village clearly outside the administrative boundary of South Ossetia; in fact, they implicitly recognized its location when they withdrew their forces on December 11. When they decided they needed to maintain control, however, they reintroduced their forces on December 13, and the Georgian side withdrew. Although some international observers, such as the EUMM, promptly condemned the Russians' reentry (ref E), the Russian side apparently made the determination that controlling the area -- which has far less strategic significance than the areas north of the Enguri -- was well worth the censure. That censure was not unanimous or overwhelming, however. On December 22, EmbOffs in fact heard from the EUMM that even its statement was itself internally criticized by EU Special Envoy Pierre Morel, who apparently feared it would upset the Russians on the eve of the third round of Geneva talks.

¶9. (C) Because the Enguri Power Station generates 40 percent of Georgia's electricity in the winter, the international community would likely react quite strongly to any move on the triangle west of the Enguri Dam. Some observers therefore suggest that the Abkhaz and Russians will move on Ganmukhuri and Khurcha, not the triangle, and observe the reaction.

What will we do?

¶10. (C) Considering the changed situation on the ground and

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the various incentives and disincentives, post considers it quite possible that Abkhazia and Russia will move at some point in the future to annex the territories north of the Enguri. This is therefore the time to consider a response if such a scenario plays out -- and what steps we might take to ward off such a move. The international community was able to work together to stop the fighting on August 12, but it has not yet successfully enforced the terms of that cease-fire. The situation in Perevi suggests that Russia has calculated that the international community will tolerate even further violations, at least around the edges of the current situation. Unless we clearly articulate the damage further incursions will do to Russia's international standing, it may well decide an improved boundary for Abkhazia is worth a bit of scolding. It may eventually decide that controlling 40 percent of Georgia's winter electricity -- and all of Abkhazia's -- is worth some diplomatic pain as well. A stronger response to the situation in Perevi might send a different signal on the costs of ignoring existing boundaries. A rejuvenated UNOMIG might be better able to monitor and deter military action. An EUMM with access into Abkhazia might do the same. All of these steps will be difficult, requiring concerted efforts by a coordinated international community -- but they would be easier than determining an appropriate response to annexation after the fact.

TEFFT